

STATEMENT TO THE 8TH ASIA-PACIFIC FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT 24 March 2021

TOWARDS JUST RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE POST-COVID AND BEYOND 2030

One year since the pandemic triggered an unprecedented and multidimensional crisis, many countries in Asia and the Pacific region are still reeling from the devastating impacts, further hampering the slow progress of realising the SDGs. The pandemic starkly exposed the fragility of economies and the labour market, which are deeply rooted in decades-long neoliberal policies that promote corporate greed and the interest of developed countries.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific region was not on track in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The [UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific](#), in its SDGs Progress Report 2020, noted that the region is “likely to miss all 17 goals by 2030” without accelerated action.

With economies sinking and struggling to respond and recover from the crisis amplified by the pandemic, the promise of fulfilling the SDGs by the 2030 deadline looks even bleaker. However, if at all, the COVID-19 pandemic showed us the deep flaws and failures of the current system and created an opportunity to rebuild and transform our economies into one that serves the interest, wellbeing, and sustainability of the people and the planet.

WORSENING DECENT WORK DEFICITS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

The current crisis has vividly shown us that decent work for all (Goal 8) is crucial in ending all forms of poverty (Goal 1). Yet, the progress in achieving Goal 8 – based on its limited indicators – is far off track even before the pandemic. Huge decent work deficits remain unaddressed; hence, when the pandemic wrecked the economy, such deficits were not only uncovered, but became more pronounced.

The economic disruptions intensified by COVID-19 bred massive joblessness and precarity, exacerbating the existing vulnerabilities of the working people. In Asia and the Pacific region, an equivalent of [145 million full-time jobs were wiped out](#) by the economic downturn triggered by the pandemic. Vulnerable workers who are often concentrated in the unprotected informal economy and in precarious non-standard employments – such as women, young people, older persons, migrants, and persons with disabilities – are among the hardest hit by the crisis.

The past year has been an uphill struggle for survival for the poorest and most vulnerable who lost their source of income and are living from hand to mouth on a daily basis. Left without adequate social protection and government assistance, workers defy social distancing rules and expose themselves to the risk of contracting the disease to be able to put food on the table and provide for their family's needs. This is a common scenario in the region where millions of people have either fallen back or pushed into poverty because of the COVID-enhanced crisis and lack of social protection floors.

Before the pandemic, 1.4 million lost their lives from industrial accidents and occupational diseases in Asia and the Pacific. The COVID-19 added to the occupational risks faced by workers who cannot stay at home and work remotely. Many lives of healthcare workers at the frontlines of responding to the health emergency have been lost after contracting the disease; meanwhile, COVID-19 outbreaks in factories in several countries in the region [rendered thousands of workers sick](#) and [ostracised by the society from being COVID-infected](#). While the gig economy and online platform-based work profited during the pandemic, especially delivery services for those working from home and locked down, drivers and riders that drive the businesses endure wage exploitation, risk their security without social protection, and are left to fend for themselves in the face of the threats to their occupational safety and health.

We believe that just recovery from the crisis and achieving the 2030 Agenda can only happen when decent work deficits are seriously addressed. Measures must not be limited to superficial indicators that do not recognise other rights and protections that are vital in ensuring a life of dignity for workers. For a genuine transformative change to be realised, the broken labour market must be repaired to guarantee labour rights and protection floors for all workers, regardless of their employment arrangements, including the fundamental rights of freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, freedom from discrimination and modern slavery through forced and child labour, occupational health and safety, minimum living wages, and maximum hours of work.

GENDER EQUALITIES IN THE WORLD OF WORK

Overrepresented in COVID-affected sectors, such as in care economy, tourism, retail, and services sectors, women are disproportionately affected by the crisis and were more likely to be forced out of employment. Before COVID, women do [80 per cent of unpaid care work](#) in Asia and the Pacific; when COVID made working from home a new normal for many workers, their burden of care work became even more demanding. Additionally, as cases of COVID-19 surge, the incidence of harassment and violence against women also surged drastically. Gender-based violence is dubbed by union women as a pandemic itself.

We acknowledge the initiatives to increase women's participation in the labour force through skills training and education. However, these efforts must be augmented with policies and practices that uphold women's fundamental rights at work, absent of discrimination. Women's participation in a labour market that exploits their cheap labour is not meaningful, but rather oppressive. Gender pay gaps in the region, women-specific occupational risks at work, and other systemic barriers for women's meaningful participation in the labour force must be eradicated.

We welcome Fiji's ratification of the ILO Convention 190 (C190) aimed at eliminating harassment and violence in the world of work. We urge other governments in Asia and the Pacific region to follow Fiji's lead and immediately take the necessary steps towards the C190 ratification. This policy action is more urgent than ever. Besides the coronavirus, misogyny and patriarchy are becoming viral, infecting the society and attacking the hard-won gains of women in promoting gender equality.

Leaving no one behind entails recognition of women's role not only in productive labour, but also in social reproduction. Thus, we call on governments to adopt policies that recognise, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work. This can be done by developing publicly financed, easily accessible, and quality gender-responsive public goods and services, including water, power, childcare, and public transport, among others.

JUST TRANSITION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

We are in an extraordinary time, faced with unprecedented multiple crises – the global health pandemic, the economic recession, and the climate crisis. Most countries in Asia and the Pacific are among the most vulnerable to climate change impacts, hence, the need for urgent and decisive climate actions that account for Just Transition. Yet, alarmingly, countries in the region are regressing in Goal 13.

The COVID-19 taught us that inaction and unjust actions in times of crisis cost people's lives and put an immensely grave toll on people's wellbeing. We must learn from the COVID-19 experience and ensure that climate, social, gender, and development justice are at the core of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transitioning to a zero-carbon economy. Just Transition measures, social dialogue and respect for human and labour rights must be central in negotiating climate policies, creating opportunities for climate-friendly and decent work, and building resilience against climate change impacts.

ALARMING TRADE UNION REPRESSION AMIDST THE MULTIPLE CRISES

At a time when solidarity is needed to help mitigate the adverse impacts of the multiple crises, it is when some countries in the region tightened their grip on workers' exercise of trade union and human rights. According to [ITUC's Global Rights Index 2020](#), Asia-Pacific is the second worst region in the world for workers' rights.

In the past year, states used the pandemic to expedite the passing of neoliberal and repressive laws that prey on the vulnerable, criminalise legitimate forms of dissent (including the rights to organise and to strike), erode previously won and guaranteed labour rights and standards in the guise of crisis responses, undermine democratic institutions, and protect the powerful, the wealthy and huge corporations. In some countries, workers and trade union members, leaders, and organisers became targets of threats, intimidation, trumped-up charges, wrongful arrests, and extrajudicial killings.

We are outraged that the internationally recognised workers' rights and democratically established mechanisms for social dialogue deteriorates amidst the climate of violence and impunity in some countries in the region. We call on governments to stop the attacks against workers and trade unionists and uphold the fundamental rights of workers, including freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Instead of strengthening the mechanisms for social dialogue at the height of the pandemic, governments 'socially distanced' themselves from workers by enacting laws, crafting policies, and making decisions without regard for the workers' interest and wellbeing. A people-centred sustainable development is not possible without social dialogue and peoples' meaningful participation in democratic processes that serve the SDGs' implementation and full realisation.

NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT FOR RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

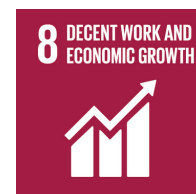
The slogan, "leaving no one behind", hardly resonates to those who suffered the devastating impacts of the COVID-19. The deeply flawed and broken economic system that fuels resource and labour exploitation as well as wealth accumulation of the few super-rich and huge corporations while the poorest and most vulnerable are left unprotected from economic shocks, climate-induced disasters, and health emergency. As the economy staggers from the pandemic, the world's [top billionaires increased their wealth by USD3.9 trillion](#) between March to December last year while the [labour income losses in 2020](#) reached USD3.7 trillion.

We need a new social contract that ensures economic recovery and resilience that can surmount the interlinked challenges of the pandemic, climate change, and inequality and fast-track the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. In this regard, we put forward five demands centred on promoting the rights and sustainability of the people and the planet.

- **Jobs.** We have witnessed how fragile businesses and a nation's development are if relying excessively on the demand from global supply chains and giving less priority to boosting domestic demand. Strengthening labour market institutions and systematic redistribution of wealth are paramount in reversing the declining labour income share and rising income inequality. It is imperative to shift from the neoliberal, export-led, debt-driven growth and labour exploitation to an income-led growth based on labour-income, pro-labour, and climate-friendly distributional policies that generates, by boosting domestic demand, an equitable, inclusive and resilient growth for the future of work.
- **Rights for all workers, irrespective of employment arrangements.** In accordance to their commitments in the [ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work](#), we call on governments and social partners to guarantee: 1) respect for fundamental rights at work, most importantly freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, 2) an adequate minimum living wage, 3) maximum limits on working hours, and 4) safety and health at work. We want to put a stop to the senseless killings of trade unionists and activists who are speaking out against injustices. We call on the UN and its agencies to step in and send missions and investigate governments—legitimate or not—that perpetrate a culture of killings and violence against legitimate forms of dissent and exercise of democratic rights, with the view of exacting accountability and addressing impunity.
- **Universal social protection.** Social protection is a fundamental human right and a prerequisite to eradicating poverty and vulnerability, redressing inequality, ensuring decent work for all, furthering just transition, and enhancing economic resilience. We have witnessed how workers in the region failed to absorb economic shocks due to lack of social protection. Thus, we demand governments to introduce social protection measures like wage subsidies and unemployment insurance to prevent workers from falling deeply into poverty. To finance social protection, governments must adopt gender-just and progressive tax policies, enhance domestic resource mobilisation in a progressive manner, and implement fiscal policies that ensure allocation for universal social protection and quality public services.
- **Equality.** The COVID-19 pandemic perpetuated a systemic crisis that fuels discrimination, racism, and unjust profiteering by a handful of billionaires. We all must work together to end all discrimination to ensure that all people can share in prosperity and sustainability and that the appalling concentration of wealth in the hands of a few at the expense of the many is undone.
- **Inclusion.** We need to strengthen inclusive development and solidarity to combat the growing power of monopolies and oligarchs. We must also push for tax systems that redistribute wealth and provide resources for governments to meet the needs of the people and the planet and to finance the implementation of SDGs. Millions have been left behind in the face of the current crises; thus, an inclusive and systemic approach is paramount on the path to just recovery and resilience post-COVID and beyond 2030.

APPENDIX

Fact sheet on SDG 8 to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all



It should be highlighted that even before the unprecedented global health, economic and social crisis from the outbreak of COVID-19, the progress on SDG 8 had lagged far behind the level to be made by 2019 to achieve the goal by 2030 (ESCAP Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020) despite positive economic and employment growth for decades. In particular, there were serious and persistent decent work deficits in the region; 356.2 million workers are still living in poverty (extreme and moderate, 2019, ILO), 1.3 billion workers (over 68% of workforce) in the region are in the informal economy (ILO); violations of workers' rights in law and practices have been increasing (ITUC Global Rights Index 2019), 1.4 million workers lost their lives by industrial accidents and diseases, to name a few. Inadequate and insufficient social protection had failed to include majority of workers in particular with vulnerability, and social dialogue had not been respected. The SDG 8 composite indicator, developed by the ITUC, to measure economic well-being, employment quality, labour vulnerability and labour rights before the pandemic also clearly shows a large portion of the world has a poor potential for the achievement of the goal with Asia and the Pacific being below the world average.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in economic and social crisis with devastating impacts on economic growth in our region with increasing unemployment labour underutilisation, informality, insecurity, occupational hazards and poverty. Furthermore, serious attacks on the fundamental workers' rights and working conditions have been observed across the region in the pretext of virus containment and recovery from the crisis.

For Developing Asia, economic contraction at -0.4 percent in 2020 was projected (ADB Asian Development Outlook Supplement in December 2020). The IMF also estimated growth contraction at -1.1 percent for Emerging and Developing Asia.

Due to serious supply side shocks through the global supply chains and further deterioration with unprecedented lockdowns, total 7.9 percent working hours were lost in 2020, relative to the last quarter of 2019, in Asia and the Pacific. This is equivalent to 140 million 48 hours/week full time jobs, almost 55 percent of the global equivalent full time job losses; 4.2 percent in Eastern Asia (35 million full time job), 8.2 percent in South Eastern Asia and the Pacific (24 million full time jobs) and 12.7 percent in Southern Asia (80 million full time jobs). This includes 62 million jobs were lost entirely and, among them, 48 million workers should leave the labour market. The increasing labour market slack would continue through 2021 and even beyond unless it was not adequately addressed. (the ILO)

According to the ILO, in the first three quarters of 2020, a sharp decline by 10.3 percent in labour income in Asia and the Pacific relative to 2019, 3 percent of loss in GDP, was estimated. Without adequate protection, the ILO estimates that the labour income loss made an additional 22 million to 25 million persons fall into working poverty (\$1.90 a day a person) in our region from 72.4 million working poor in its previous study.

As the employment losses and the reduction in labour income have been unevenly distributed between workers, in particular, with greater impacts on the most vulnerable such as women, youth, low-paid/skilled, informal and precarious workers, there will be greater economic and social inequality due to the pandemic.

Covid 19 has forced out more women than men from the labour force with higher informality and precarity as well as increasing burdens of unpaid work including care work on women during the pandemic. Without any drastic and comprehensive measures in the process of recovery from the pandemic to promote women's labour force participation, the significant gap between women and men, 44.1 percent and 76.5 percent respectively in Asia and the Pacific, would be deepened and perpetuated. The pandemic has also limited the opportunities for quality education and trainings for young people. Even before the pandemic, the number of young people in no education, employment and training in Asia and the Pacific was in the upward trend, from 158.9 million in 2018 to 160.9 million in 2019. According to the ILO, young workers have been facing much larger decreases in post-support labour income and female workers have been experiencing more losses in post-support labour income comparing with male workers.

It was estimated by the ILO that over 1.6 billion informal workers, mostly resided in our region and also disproportionately occupied by women, in the globe were significantly impacted by the lockdown measures. With inadequate social protection, 14 percent point (from 22% to 36%) increase in relative poverty among informal workers in Asia and the Pacific was projected in the first month of crisis, which implies that most informal workers and their families are likely to fall into poverty. In addition, almost 58 percent of the 76 percent of the total domestic workers significantly impacted by the pandemic measures are women.

It should be also emphasised more that Asia and the Pacific is still a region with prevalence of child labour, forced labour and modern slavery. The current economic downturn with the serious labour income losses as well as disruptions in education, there should be more decisive and collective actions to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, forced labour and modern slavery in our region.

As pointed out, social protection in the Asian and the Pacific region has been underdeveloped in serious deficits. Only 43.4 percent population in the region are covered by at least one social protection benefit. The pandemic and ensuing economic and social crisis highlight these deficits clearly with the most vulnerable workers being easily excluded from protection or supported insufficiently. The pandemic has made the government of 40 countries in our region to implement 348 social protection measures as responses to the COVID-19 crisis, mostly by introducing new programmes or benefits (50%) or by adjusting programme or expenditure (37%). However, with the rampant informal economy as well as institutional and administrative deficits in emerging and developing economies, still billions of workers and their families have been out of adequate protection.

Even though the current crisis arisen from the global health crisis might be regarded unprecedented. it should be carefully looked through the lens of persistent decent work deficits for the past decades under rampant attacks on values of collectivism, social solidarity, multilateralism and public services including a health system and care economy.

Despite unfair, oppressive, dangerous and discriminative working environments, workers and trade unions have been at the forefront of recovery and resilience from the current crisis. For example, a large number of health care workers as well as workers in necessary public services have made their every effort while facing greater occupational risks and murderous workloads with chronic underinvestment in the public sector. Trade unions have

been harnessing their organisational power to promote social dialogue for better and adequate government responses to the pandemic as well as to fill a social protection gap to support most vulnerable members in their unions and communities. However, it is obvious that without a fundamental change for decent work it would not be possible to achieve recovery and resilience from the pandemic. In order to build forward better in a post-pandemic era towards truly sustained, inclusive, resilient and sustainable development to achieve the SDGs, a new social contract with SDG8 at its core should be built.

As mentioned, the Covid-19 crisis makes SDG 8 more relevant than ever, emphasising the importance of occupational safety and health, protecting jobs and workers' rights, strengthening social protection systems, and addressing unemployment and informality shocks. The interlinkages between SDG 8 and the other SDGs are numerous and significant. The full achievement of SDG targets largely depends on the achievement of SDG 8, premised on the promotion of inclusive and sustainable policies at social and environmental level, going beyond the economic dimension only.

Therefore, the following recommendations are put forward by workers and trade unions to governments to accelerate SDG 8 and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda:

1) Human well-being and sustainable and just economies

- Establish a labour protection floor that guarantees fundamental workers' rights, an adequate minimum wage, maximum limits on working time, and safety and health at work. (SDG 8, 1, 5, 10, 16)
- Extend social protection systems and access to universal health care to ensure comprehensive and universal coverage to workers in all forms of work through a combination of tax-based social protection floors and contributory social security, in line with ILO standards (Convention 102 and Recommendation 202). (SDG 8, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11)
- Implement and enforce statutory minimum wages that guarantee dignity for all workers and their families. Ensure collective bargaining rights everywhere and promote collective agreements with sectoral coverage. (SDG 8, 1, 10)
- Put in place and enforce equal pay, care services and responsibilities sharing, and gender-based antidiscrimination legislation, including pay transparency measures, and ratify and effectively implement ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206 on violence and harassment at work. (SDG 8, 5)
- Remove the barriers that prevent women's labour force participation by promoting gender-just skills training and education and creating gender-responsive infrastructures, such as day care, safe public spaces and transport, safe, free, and quality public washrooms, and safe homes for survivors (SDG 8, 5, 10)
- Take concrete actions for the formalisation of the informal economy according to ILO Recommendation 204, supported by ILO Recommendation 202 on social protection floors. (SDG 8, 5, 10)
- Put in place inclusive and sustainable industrial policies based on tripartite negotiations with social partners and governments. (SDG 8, 9)
- Ensure business accountability and transparency in investments and due diligence in global supply chains as prescribed by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles on Multinational Enterprises and social policy. (SDG 8, 7, 11, 12, 13)
- Invest in quality public education systems, from early childhood through to higher education, and guarantee lifelong learning opportunities enabling people to acquire skills and to reskill over their entire lifetime to embrace the environmental and technological transitions. (SDG 8, 4)

- Develop and improve laws that to protect migrant workers, including temporary migrant workers, especially migrant domestic workers, caregivers, fishermen and seafarers, agricultural workers, seasonal workers and those in informal sector. Furthermore, craft policies to protection vulnerable workers such as migrants, women and youth from labour trafficking. (SDG 8, 5, 10, 13)
- Support the establishment of an international governance system and standard(s) for digital platform business, as well as regulations to govern data use for the technological transition. (SDG 8, 9)

2) Energy decarbonisation

- Take stock of the externalities of economic activity, such as the environmental consequences, and establish statistical measures that go beyond GDP growth.
- Promote investments in key areas for sustainable work and technological innovations to reduce the impact of production on the environment. (SDG 8, 13)
- Design and implement Just Transition plans with workers' and employers' representatives to advance energy decarbonisation, sustainable cities and resilience of rural communities, leaving no one behind. (SDG 8, 7, 11)
- Provide technical, legal and financial assistance and implement public industrial policies favouring the transition to a low-carbon, circular production model, with better levels of research development and innovation and greater social, environmental and economic sustainability. (SDG 8, 13)

3) Governance and collective action

- Institutionalise social dialogue processes and tripartism for the implementation of SDG 8 and the 2030 Agenda. (Governance)
- Ensure the respect of the rights to freedom of association, collective bargaining and the right to organise (ILO Conventions 87 and 98) to guarantee collective representation of workers and employers in social dialogue processes. (Collective action)
- Improve the availability and comparability of statistical data (especially for less-developed countries) to allow more comprehensive, robust and precise analyses of progress made on the SDGs, including SDG 8. (Global governance)